

Harvesting the wild

hunting and using
deer, elk, and moose

By Jackie Clay

A lot of us self-reliant folks, especially those of us now living in the woods somewhere, hunt and forage for a part of our food. Although we raise a steer for beef and have poultry to butcher, we also hunt wild meat to “fill in” for those years that we don’t butcher a beef. I try to never let my pantry of home canned meat get too low. It isn’t provident—or safe.

Now I’m a 55-year-old grandma with a bum ankle. I can’t kill a chicken (Bob does the dirty work.), but I buy my license and shoot a meat animal. I love the hunt, but I hate the killing and feel sorry for taking a life. I guess it’s a complex issue.

I took my son, David, with me this year. He needs the practice in being quiet and learning the ways of the hunt. The hunt didn’t last long. An hour before sunset, we spotted a nice fat forkhorn buck on the slope of the canyon. I’m one of those old-timers, I guess. I hunt with a Winchester .30-30 with open sights. I don’t shoot long distances. I try to place myself on a game trail or stalk browsing animals. And I’m Scotch with ammunition. I’m still on the same box I bought in 1990, and we’ve eaten an elk, several deer, and more from it. I shot my buck and restrained David, who wanted to go “chase” him.

After 10 minutes, I let him go find the buck. He needed the experience. And while he went, I thought maybe some readers, new to the woods, might like a few hints on hunting, dressing out an antlered game animal, cutting up the meat, and home canning it to stock up the pantry.



Jackie Clay stands proudly with her Winchester .30-30 and buck.

We won't get into weapons. Everyone has his or her opinions here—pretty darned strong opinions. We have several rifles, along with a shotgun and slugs, and bows and arrows, and all have put meat in our pantry. It's not so much the weapon, but what you do with it.

Learn to get close to game. I know northern Indians who have killed bear and moose with a .22. I sure wouldn't

recommend such a light rifle for big game, but it has been done. Pick a weapon adequate to the game you will be hunting, and get plenty of practice at shooting it under all conditions and positions. Become accurate with it at varying distances, but forget those long shots. You don't want to wound an animal that escapes and dies a miserable death. That is not hunting; it is stupidity and cruelty.

Finding game

The best way to ensure a successful hunt is to do a lot of scouting before the season opens. As we live in the woods, this is easy for us. By simply spending a lot of time out in the mountains, we learn not only what kind of animals are out there, but which ones. We get to know their comings and goings intimately. This cuts a lot of corners and saves much time when we go out carrying a rifle.

My hunt this year lasted an hour. Yep, I was lucky. But I also knew where the bucks came down the canyon in the evening looking for does with that "come hither" look in their eyes.

Deer. Although there are several species of deer in the U.S., deer generally behave like deer. During the day, they'll often lay up in sheltered wooded or brushy spots. Mule deer favor canyons and rocky areas wooded with pine and fir. Eastern white-tails like islands in lowland swamps and points of high ground near brushy lower land. Water will usually not be too far away for either species.

It's tough to hunt deer in the daytime, as one often spooks them as you walk through the woods or they just sit tight and do not move about. But in the early morning and early evening, they will usually be found strolling toward a grassy meadow to fill up on grass and browse. It's here the hunter can make meat.

By taking a stand near an open spot on a deer trail leading from the woods to a meadow, with the wind from the woods to you, you can often watch deer come and go until your choice shows up. While there are many tactics to becoming "invisible" to deer, the best are to remain absolutely quiet, moving very slowly when you must and not smelling like a human: no tobacco, no booze, no perfumed soap, no perfumed deodorant, no dryer-dried clothes.



Bull elk in early morning fog

We do not smoke or drink alcohol. I line-dry all our clothes so there is no dryer odor. I throw my hunting jacket, hat, and boots in a feed sack with a few pine boughs a week before season. We use homemade lye soap, which has very little odor.

I've had deer pass within five feet of me, wearing hunter orange, and never know I was there. On a bet, I got out of the truck without my rifle, got down on all fours and approached a deer that saw me from the start. And by imitating a fawn's bleat, I got that deer to come so close I could slap it. No special attractant or scent masking. Just no human scent and plain deer curiosity.

In many areas of the east, whitetails are hunted most effectively from a tree stand. For us, this was simply a few planks nailed seven feet up a well-branched tree. If you choose this method, locate the stand on the edge of the woods where you have seen deer come and go, plus there are plenty of deer signs, weeks before the season begins or they will notice it and shy away. When on the stand, stay absolutely quiet. Wear warm boots, as your feet will often get cold due to inactivity.

With any hunting, take your time shooting. A heart-lung shot is always best; never shoot at a deer running away from you. You are making meat, not slaughtering an animal. The most meat is in the hind quarters; don't take a chance at ruining it. If the deer is spooky and trotting away, you can often stop it by imitating a fawn's bleat, which sounds like a kid goat's. I've not only stopped a buck this way, but had them actually turn and come back toward me.

Elk. Elk are harder to hunt than deer. They are more wary, quicker to stampede, and less apt to return once they spook. In much of the West, you'll find elk at higher elevations during bow season and early rifle season. The cold weather and heavy snow usually drive them to lower ele-

vations—below 6,000 feet—in late rifle season.

Look for elk near heavy forests, intermingled with open areas. They graze more than deer, but also eat brush tips. Elk are seldom far from water. In the rut, bulls often dig up a wallow in which they urinate and churn up, rolling in to perfume themselves. They also use the wallow and creek bottoms to cool off after a harem-saving battle or chasing cows in estrus.

Besides looking for tracks and elk-berries, be aware of elk scent, which is a sweetish fragrance. In heavily used areas, such as favorite meadows and bedding grounds, you will notice this aroma. It will be a good area to hunt, later on.

Like deer, elk are seldom seen during the day, even less so than deer. Elk drift into meadows to graze very early in the morning, even before it is light, and usually leave just after daybreak. They show back up in these meadows just at sundown, grazing until after dark. During the day, they usually bed down in canyon-like rocky areas with tree or heavy brush cover where they can leap up and be gone at the slightest disturbance.

Your best chances of getting an elk are found by either ambushing your choice on his/her way to or from a grazing meadow or waiting for "city" hunters to drive a herd up from a lower elevation. You'll have to learn where the herds flee into heavy forests and what paths they usually use. Elk are creatures of habit and you can use this to your advantage.

While you may be tempted to shoot at any part of an elk you can hit, wait until you get a head-on or broadside shot and be sure you kill the elk, not simply wound it. We watched a young bull elk limp around with a broken hind leg all winter, a victim of a poor hunter's quick shot. His leg healed, but most are not so lucky.

Moose. The moose is the king of deer, inspiring awe in anyone who

runs across one in the forest. Huge and black, his antlers spread out better than five feet. And he is the tastiest of all wild game meats. Unfortunately there are more hunters all the time, and in many areas, one must draw for a moose license.

Should you be lucky enough to live where you can hunt moose, or you are lucky in the drawing and get a moose license, you have a good chance of making a mountain of meat.

Moose are easier to hunt than either deer or elk. They are so big that they have few enemies and regard man as an annoyance. Bulls in rut will quickly convince you that it is their woods. They have chased hunters right to their trucks. Sort of looking like a black locomotive with antlers, one does have to respect their power—and touchy disposition.

While moose will take to the high ground forest during the day, they will usually be found in lowland, swamp, lakeshore, or rivers. Moose browse on willow brush, leaves, and water plants, even underwater. Unlike hunting deer and elk, it's not generally too hard to find a moose. One only needs to make a sure, killing shot in a decent place to dress the animal. Don't shoot a moose in a lake or fast-moving river, as you might not be able to retrieve an 800 to 1,200-pound limp body in deep water.

Take into consideration, also, how you will get the dead moose to your truck. You can't drag him. Even quartered, he weighs a lot. The time to think about this is when you see him standing there, not when he's down and dead.

Field dressing

Once the animal is shot and it does not fall dead, wait five minutes if you're reasonably sure you put in a good shot. With a heart-lung shot, the animal will often trot off 100 feet and drop dead. This is why you should not charge after it. Once the adrena-

Steps in skinning a deer, elk, or moose



1. Cut around each leg with a sharp knife. Don't cut down on the hair, but poke through the skin and cut up from underneath.
2. Cutting upward again, cut from leg cut, up inside of leg to center belly cut.
3. Cut high around neck, then down throat to cut at brisket.
4. Pull hide away from carcass while gently cutting along carcass with very sharp knife. Use "sketching" cuts, rather than hacking. You can use a good hide for many projects. One full of holes is just about worthless.
5. I skin out both hind legs, then work on neck, front legs and shoulders. A helper is great at hurrying up the job, pulling on the hide as you skin; a hide will almost rip loose without cutting.
6. As in removing a coat, pull the hide down from the shoulders and back, toward the hind quarters. Much will pull loose without cutting. At the tail, pull the hide very hard and most of the tail will turn inside out. Cut the bone and the hide will be free.
7. Use a hose or buckets of clean, cold water to rinse the carcass off, inside and out. It will remove most of the clinging hair, as well as cooling and cleaning the meat.

Top: Cut around leg with sharp knife. Middle: Don't cut down on the hair but poke through the skin and cut up from underneath. Bottom: Use "sketching" cuts, rather than hacking.

line surges, a dying animal can run a long way before dropping. If you do not blast away after it or run after it, it will simply stop.

After your five minute wait is up, go to the spot you shot the animal if you did not see it drop. Then, cautiously, follow the trail. When you see the animal, stop and wait. Is it still breathing? Hunters have been injured by walking up to a “dead” animal and bending down to begin dressing it, only to have it leap up and charge over them. Not a pretty picture, especially when it is a big bull elk or moose.

If the animal is dead, immediately tag it and begin field dressing. The longer you leave the entrails and blood in the body, the worse the meat will taste.

It does little good to cut the throat on a dead animal. The heart has stopped pumping blood. I usually begin to dress an animal by propping it up on its back and holding the belly skin, in front of the pelvic bone, up away from the body. By gently poking the tip of the knife into the skin, I can open it a few inches. Then gently cut, with the blade upward, poking down into the abdominal cavity. You don’t want to hack into it, or you will spill stomach and bowel contents onto your meat.

Cut all the way up until you hit the brisket. Then carefully split the pelvic bone with a small saw, a hatchet or (shudder...but I’ve done it) rap the back of your hunting knife with a rock until you’ve driven it through the bone. Again, very carefully, cut around the rectum, pulling it free enough to tie off. If this is tied well with a cord or even a green willow shoot, the contents of the bowel will not accidentally fall onto your meat.

If your animal is a male, carefully cut beside the testicles and penis. Now, by reaching all the way into the abdominal cavity, you can pull and shove. The entire lower “gut pile” will roll out in one lump. Gravity is a



Removing front quarter



Remove hind quarters with saw or sharp hatchet and knife.

great aid here, especially with a huge animal. By either hanging the animal, head up, in a tree or on a pole, or even having it on a slope, the gutting will be much easier.

Reach into the upper body cavity and rip or carefully cut through the diaphragm. Reach as high as you can and cut the esophagus and pull down, removing the lungs. The entire insides are now outside; you are ready to head for home. If there is snow on the ground or clean, running water nearby, rinse out the abdominal cavity. This will not only remove most of the blood but it will wash

away any “mistakes,” such as a punctured stomach or colon.

Getting it home

A deer is easy to get home or to your truck. Most of the time you can simply put a rope on its head and drag it over the grass. But if the ground is rocky, the brush thick, or you have far to go you will not only kill yourself this way but you will probably bruise up the meat pretty bad. Instead, roll him onto a kids’ plastic toboggan. Tie him down, if necessary, to keep him there. Then

drag him out on that. He'll slide right along over rocks and brush.

A moose or elk is another story. But, again, you don't want to drag them far, even with a horse, ATV, or truck because you'll bruise up the meat. If you should be lucky enough to have killed a large meat animal near a road or trail, you can simply fasten a come-along to the animal's head, with the other end to a front stake pocket of the truck and, by lowering the tailgate all the way down, jack your meat-on-the-hoof right in the truck bed.

But, unfortunately, most moose and elk are shot a good distance from any drivable trail, so skinning and quartering the animal on the spot is the only viable option.

Now, when one quarters a big meat animal in "civilization," a person simply skins it, hanging from a tree or pole, then saws the head and lower legs off and neatly splits the carcass right down the spine. When you have a 500-pound or better chunk of meat lying on the forest floor, things are a bit different.

First skin the animal (see instructions), then remove the lower legs and head, high up on the neck. Be careful not to get the meat side of the skin dirty, as this will be our tarp on which to stack your quartered meat.

I begin field quartering by removing both front shoulders with upper leg attached. This is most easily done if you have a helper to pull upward on the leg while you cut under the "armpit." If not, get creative; tie it up with a piece of cord or rope or get your shoulder under it and heave upward while you slice.

The shoulder is not fastened to the carcass with a bone joint, so it is very easily cut free. Just carefully slice under and around the leg and shoulder blade until it is free.

Lay the first shoulder on your clean skin (hair side down). Repeat with the second leg. See, the carcass now looks a whole lot smaller.



Hosing removes hair and debris, and it also cools the meat.

Few hunters carry a meat saw into the woods while hunting elk or moose, me included. And those small folding knife blade saws are worthless. But I do carry a sharp hatchet on my belt. With your knife cut as much of the hind quarters free as you can, until you hit bone in the spine. Take your sharp hatchet and carefully chop the spine in two. By tucking your hide tarp under the hind quarters, you can pull the entire hind end onto the tarp to finish your work so it doesn't get full of grass or leaves.

Now cut down the top of the meat, directly over the spine, all the way to the tail, using first your knife, then your hatchet. In a few short strokes your hind quarters will separate and fall to your hide. This leaves the neck and rib cage. On the top of the rib cage, lying on each side, are the backstraps, one of the choicest cuts of meat. And on the inside top of the rib cage are the tenderloins, the very best meat on the entire animal.

I fillet both the backstraps and tenderloins out in one piece each. Some people have bone-in steaks made; the backstraps and tenderloins are the "meat" in the steaks. But we prefer our game meat totally boned, and I do not pack out more bone than necessary.

To fillet the backstraps, slip your knife along the ribs, all the way to the spine and work it along the entire length of the backstrap, from shoulder to back end. Then lightly cut down from the top of the spine, holding the cylinder-shaped backstrap away from the rib cage as you cut. Lay this on your hide tarp and repeat.

The tenderloin is filleted in the same manner, only from the inside of the rib cage. It is the long, dark strip of meat, lying on each side of the underside of the spine, not nearly so large as the backstrap.

If you are in bear country, drag your hide tarp full of meat some distance from the gut pile. Bears, especially grizzlies, are getting so they are attracted to the sound of rifle fire, knowing there will be at least a gut pile to gorge on. I don't want to become a statistic.

There are several ways you can get your meat out of the woods, depending on how far you are in, and where you are. Moose are most often killed near water, so a canoe is handy to pack out the meat so you can get it to a place where you can load it into a truck. Lay a clean plastic tarp in the bow and center of your canoe and pile the meat carefully, taking time to balance your load. The hide can again

be used to cover the load as protection against flies and insects. One caution: if you are taking the antlered head as a trophy, be sure you tie orange cloth over it or you may get shot.

Quartered elk may be packed out on horseback or on a plastic sled behind a snowmobile, person, or ATV or you can use a single wheeled game cart. I prefer using a horse, but realize not everyone has one available.

If you cannot pack out all of your meat in one trip, which is often the case, especially when you are taking that trophy head and antlers, along with that lovely hide, separate the meat into two loads. Tie the second load up in the hide and haul it several hundred feet from the gut pile, tying the bundle up on a rope, 10 feet from the ground. You don't want to come back and find a bear has claimed your animal. Several Alaskan and Western hunters have had unfortunate encounters with aggressive bears guarding meat. Even a black bear, usually timid and mild tempered, won't pass an opportunity to grab all the meat he can if it is lying about.

I take the best cuts on my first trip, just in case. If the day comes when I run across a bear standing over my meat, I won't argue about it much. More than one hunter has been killed trying to drive an aggressive bear away from food. Luckily, this very seldom happens; I've never had a bear-hunter conflict of any kind.

Keeping the meat in good condition

If the temperature is cool during the day and cold at night (below 40 degrees), it is a good idea to let the skinned carcass hang, covered with an old sheet, for a few days. This allows the meat to become more tender, just as good beef is aged naturally.

But if it is warmer, get that meat quartered, at least, and into coolers with ice. I love wild game meat, but

I've had some *awful* venison. You don't go to the supermarket and buy a large beef roast, then carry it around in the trunk of your car or leave it lying on the deck for a week before you eat it. Of course not. But I've seen elk and deer hanging in a tree in people's yards for a month or more of 60 degree weather. Yuck!

Cutting the meat at home

While you can always take your deer, elk, or moose in to a game processing plant to be rendered into steaks, roasts, hamburger, and chops, you can easily save a few (quite a few, actually) bucks and custom-cut that meat right at home.

I do, and prefer to do the entire job, from hunting to canning, myself. I'm that picky. You won't find a hair in my meat. No fat. No gristle. By cutting and processing my own meat, I know each piece intimately; it's never "mystery meat." And no one has ever mentioned a word about my game meat being "gamey" or not asked for second helpings.

Now you can cut your meat and freeze it in white freezer wrap if you wish, but I am totally committed to home canning my meat. Once properly canned, it is good, practically forever, unlike frozen venison, which must be used within a year or it will usually freezer burn. This renders it just about inedible because of the nasty taste. And canned venison is tender and pre-cooked, ready in only a few minutes.

When I cut my meat, I have three bowls. The first is for yucky scrap, such as bloodshot or bruised meat, hair, gristle and fat. The second is for meat to be ground, either for hamburger or sausages. The third is for stewing meat and steaks or roasts. This bowl is large and shallow so I can sort the meat as I cut—roasts or steaks to the right, stewing meat to the left. I bone all my venison. I boil

moose bones for broth, but do not like the flavor of elk and deer broth—it is much like mutton. One either likes it or doesn't. So all my bones go into a clean bucket.

I cut all my meat with a small, very sharp paring knife. Like I said, I'm terribly picky about cutting my meat, so I take twice as long as most folks do to cut up a game animal. I begin with the neck and work backward on the carcass, leaving the hind quarters to last. I believe this gives them more time to become tender, as I take at least two days to cut up an entire carcass, usually more, depending on the size of the animal.

All lean, connective tissue-free meat is cut for either stewing meat or steaks/roasts, depending on what I decide it would work best as—or what I need more. The steaks/roasts are cut into chunks about an inch thick, just a little larger than would slide nicely into a wide mouth canning jar. The meat will shrink while it is precooked.

Tougher meat and that with connective tissue, such as the lower upper legs, goes into the hamburger bowl. When done, I mix beef fat with this and grind it as lean hamburger. I used to use pork fat, but much prefer the taste of the beef fat in my venison burger. One tip here: if your meat and fat are just a bit frozen, it will grind much better. Warmish meat will be slimy when ground. A coarse grind makes great meat for chili. A finer grind makes regular hamburger.

The neck and shoulders are cut in chunks and slices, as seems best. The backstraps and tenderloins can be canned in roasts, leaving whole; only cut into jar lengths. Or they can be cut into boneless chops, an inch thick—better than prime beef.

The hind quarters are cut in slices around the bone, half at a time, top first, then the underside. As each slice is removed, trim it, then cut it to your

choice of cut—stewing meat or steaks/roasts.

Home canning venison

I used to can my meat using the raw pack, which means that raw chunks of meat are packed into jars, to within 1 inch of the top. No liquid is added, only 1 teaspoon of salt per quart or ½ teaspoon per pint. The jars are then placed in a roaster pan holding enough water to come to the neck of the jar, but not higher. This water is simmered until the meat in the open jars is thoroughly heated. This is called exhausting and ensures that the meat is hot when the jars are capped and placed into the pressure canner.

While this works well, and is a fast method of meat preservation, I've switched to precooking the meat, instead.

The reason I switched is because the raw packed meat tends to dry out and is more stringy and hard to chew than precooked meat, canned with broth.

I put a tablespoonful of grease in a very large frying pan and sear the meat, steaks/roasts, then the stew meat. The meat is cooked until it is about half done. This shrinks it and heats it thoroughly.

I pack the meat into jars, using wide mouth jars for steaks/roasts, because they are easier to get the processed meat out of later on, and regular jars for stew meat and ground meat. The jars are filled to within one inch of the top. Then I make an unthickened brown gravy by adding about two cups of hot water to each tablespoon of fat/juice in the frying pan. To this, I add powdered beef soup base, nicely browning the gravy, and 1 tablespoon of dehydrated onion powder.

Pour this boiling broth over hot meat in jars to within 1 inch of the top. Wipe the rim clean, place a hot, previously boiled lid on the jar, and screw down the ring firmly-tight. Process pints in a pressure canner for 75 minutes, quarts for 90 minutes, at

10 pounds pressure if you live below 1,000 feet above sea level. If you live between 1,001 and 2,000, increase the pressure to 11 pounds. Increase the pressure to 12 pounds if you live between 2,001 and 4,000, and to 13 pounds if you live between 4,001 and 6,000 feet, and so on to 15 pounds at 10,000 feet.

I use the above method for stew meat, roasts, and steaks. The ground venison is pre-fried, but canned without broth or gravy. Much of it I make up as a recipe, such as spaghetti sauce, chili, taco meat, etc. And, of course, about half of my ground meat is made into sausages—summer sausage, pepperoni, and more, which I also home can—if there's enough left.

Check your home canning manual for exact canning directions or thumb through back issues of *BHM* for some of my canning articles.

But not all of my venison ends up as canned meat. If I didn't make up a good hefty batch of jerky, my family would move out.

Venison jerky

While some folks use the scrap cuts of meat for jerky, I use some of the best. We like good jerky, and we don't like to gnaw on tough shoe leather that is jerky-flavored.

By choosing good cuts of meat and slicing it across the grain, you are assured of tender jerky.

My last deer provided one entire backstrap and about one third of one hind quarter's worth of jerky in three flavors. The flavor of all was excellent.

Today's jerky is sweeter and less hard than old trapper and Indian jerky. It's easier and quicker to eat, but it will not last a long time without either canning or freezing it. To home can your jerky, simply pack in wide mouth pint or half pint jars, **without liquid** and process the same as any meat.

There are probably as many recipes for jerky as there are for salsa—thousands, perhaps. And most are very good. One very easy and tasty recipe that our family likes is as follows:

Quick smoky jerky. Slice strips or pieces of venison or beef ½-inch thick across the grain. Trim off all fat; it will go rancid quickly. In a medium mixing bowl, mix ½ cup soy sauce, ½ cup Worcestershire sauce, ½ teaspoon coarse black pepper, 1 teaspoon ground garlic, ½ cup brown sugar, and ½ teaspoon of Liquid Smoke. Place the meat in the bowl and stir well. Press down so that most of the meat is entirely covered. Cover the bowl and refrigerate overnight (or 24 hours if a stronger flavor is desired). Stir every few hours during the day and keep pressed down. Drip the strips dry and lay on your electric dehydrator tray or place on wire cake cooling racks and put in your gas oven, set at 150 degrees, with the door propped open about an inch. After an hour, turn meat over and reduce the heat to 140 degrees. Dehydrate until the jerky is leathery and has no moist spots.

Put this meat in Zip-lock plastic bags to freeze or refrigerate for short storage times; you often won't need more, as we eat ours up pretty darned quickly. It's that good.

If your family likes spicy jerky, you can add ½ teaspoon of chili paste (not powder) or any other hot sauce to the marinade.

Now, besides all these great foods from venison, you can also make some dynamite sausage. I grind some with two thirds lean venison and one third pork fat, add salt, pepper, sage, and hot pepper, to our likes. You'll have to experiment with the first small batch. Mix it, going a bit light on the seasonings, then fry up some patties for breakfast. This will tell you if your mix is perfect or not. If you'd like some other mix, change your proportions.

You can make any style sausage from venison, from pepperoni for pizza to spicy Italian sausage, following sausage making directions in any good sausage making book. I use *Great Sausage Recipes* by Ryték Kutas.

And, to carry this one step further, I can many sausages without liquid, in wide mouth pint and quart jars. It's true that many dry sausages will keep quite a while under cool, dry conditions, but I usually can up a batch, just to make certain I don't lose some of my precious meat. I'm sure that once you add hunting deer, elk, or moose to your homesteading skills (or if you already have), you'll pick up a lot of ideas for using the meat when you cut up and process it at home. This meat is so good, so versatile, and so cheap it's a wonder that more folks don't hunt. My meat this year cost me a bullet, a hunting license, and a few hours of work. Δ